

Pilgrim Award Speech for the SF Research Association (1979)

From my earliest reading of Verne, Wells, Thomas More, and the Groff Conklin anthologies that circulated from hand to hand in post-war Yugoslavia, I have as a socialist been fascinated by the “it ain’t necessarily so” aspect of SF – which for me does not start with Gernsback, Verne, or even Shelley, but with the universal legends of Earthly Paradise and the Promethean impulse toward a knowledge to be wedded to self-governing happiness on this Earth. Of course, this embraces also all the narrations which deal with analogs to such radically new relationships among people – however narratively estranged into other worlds and other figures such relationships might be, for the good and sufficient reason that one needs a complex optical system in order to see oneself. Bearing in mind that every SF narration is a dialogue with the reader here and now, this also embraces all the stories that deal with radically worse relationships than the reader knows, since his/her reaction to such stories – by the rule of minus times minus makes plus or of negating the negation – recuperates these new maps of hell for the positive vision.

Looking back upon my criticism of SF, it seems to me that I have tried to mimic in it this stubbornly contrary and contesting backbone of the narrations I was writing about. I have contested Henry Ford’s saying “History is bunk,” and tried to persuade my readers that an understanding of the living, even if subterranean, traditions of the past is the only way to give the present a chance of evolving into a tolerable future. I have contested the saying, whose equally immortal author I forgot at the moment (was it Damon Knight?), “SF is what I mean when I point at some books,” and tried to persuade my readers that any general statements about SF have to

be a negotiation between empirical evidence, that sets at least some limits to induction, and logically, historically, as well as politically defensible notions and systems of notions. I have contested the twin orthodoxies that SF is either the singer of technological progress/breakdown (as the case may be) or a thin disguise for the expression of eternal and mythical human-cum-cosmic verities. Instead, I have tried to approach a systematic argument on how history and society are not simply the contexts of fiction but its inly interfused factors, shaping it much more intimately than shores shape a river or blanks shape a letter. Finally – and possibly as a premise to all the other stances – I have contested on the one hand the academic elitism wrinkling its none too perfect nose at the sight of popular literature and art, and on the other hand the fannish shoreless ocean of indiscriminately happy passages to continents full of masterpieces miraculously emerging year upon year.

And yet, SF is not only the Gershwin Brothers' heterodox "it ain't necessarily so" but also "things could be otherwise"; it is not only militant critique but also (at least in approximation) triumphant revelation: in Tom Moylan's good terms, both denunciation and annunciation. Thus, taking one's cue from the matter at hand – as any materialist should – I believe we should try also to be positive about it and about its criticism, and to say something about those writings which help us to illuminate our inter-related existences: writings of More, Cyrano, Morris, Wells or Zamyatin, but also of Čapek, Dick, Le Guin, the Strugatskys, Lem, Gibson, Disch, Spinrad, K.S. Robinson (add your own names here) ... How much I may have succeeded in that in my own writings or in co-editing some books, but above all the journal *Science-Fiction Studies*, is for you to say.